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U.S. Defends Action in U.N. on Raid

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 6 — The Reagan Administration decided not to veto a Security Council resolution condemning Israel's attack on the P.L.O. in Tunisia after Washington received intelligence warnings that an American veto might lead to the overthrow of the pro-Western Tunisian Government by Libyan-backed mobs, Administration officials said today.

In the face of criticism from Israel and American Jewish organizations over its decision to abstain Friday night, the Administration moved today to explain its position privately to Israelis and others. The Council voted 14 to 0 to condemn the Israeli attack, which took place last Tuesday at the headquarters of the P.L.O. chairman, Yasir Arafat.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz telephoned Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir of Israel, who was in New York, to assure him that the Reagan Administration remained committed to strong action against terrorists. He also told Mr. Shamir that the United States agreed the Israeli attack on the Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters was a legitimate act of self-defense against a series of terrorist acts ordered by the P.L.O., Israeli and American officials said this afternoon. Mr. Shultz authorized the Israelis to make his comments public.

Reagan Makes Decision

The decision not to veto the Security Council resolution was made Friday night by President Reagan, shortly before the Council was about to vote on the Tunisian complaint, a White House aide said.

He said Mr. Reagan and other high officials had considerable sympathy for the Israeli action. But, he said, there was overwhelming information suggesting that a United States veto would provide Libya with an emotional issue with which to unleash leftist students and other groups into the streets in Tunisia, perhaps to destroy the American Embassy and perhaps to overthrow the Government of President Habib Bourguiba.

For several months, tensions have been very high between Tunisia and Libya, with the Libyans infiltrating armed agents into Tunisia, expelling Tunisian workers, and sending jet fighters over Tunisian territory, officials said. In retaliation, Tunisia has severed diplomatic relations. On a trip to Washington last June, Mr. Bourguiba sought and received an assur-

ance from Mr. Reagan of continuing American military support and political backing for Tunisia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Presidential statement of support for the Tunisian Government, which has been reaffirmed publicly several times as tensions have risen, was meant as a warning to Libya. Washington said it was caught completely by surprise by the Israeli air attack, in which American-made F-15's were used against the P.L.O. headquarters 21 miles south of Tunis.

Reflecting the surprise, the Administration issued contradictory statements about the raid for most of last week, at first expressing support and then backing off. This only complicated the problems for Mr. Bourguiba, Administration officials said.

Mr. Reagan, himself, seemed to endorse the raid by making impromptu comments in which he said every nation had the right to retaliate against terrorist attacks "as long as you pick out the people responsible." He said he had full confidence in Israeli intelligence, which had asserted that the P.L.O. had organized a series of attacks on Israelis, including the murder of three tourists in Cyprus on Sept. 25.

The initial American endorsements provoked anti-American outrage in Tunisia, and fanned rumors that the United States had assisted Israel in the raid, which the United States has denied. Officials said the United States Ambassador to Tunisia, Peter Sebastian, cabled urgently from Tunis that unless the Administration drastically changed its public policy, the Bourguiba Government would be in trouble.

The Ambassador and intelligence officials here said that Libya, which had failed to undermine Tunisia's stability in recent months, might now be able to succeed by taking advantage of the impression that there had been American connivance with Israel.

An Administration official said today that concern among the Americans in Tunis was so acute that orders were given to begin putting classified embassy documents in shredding machines as a precautionary measure in case the embassy was attacked by leftist mobs.

"We found ourselves in the position of having helped the Tunisians block the Libyans from causing big trouble, only to have the Israelis seemingly do the Libyan work for them," a White House official said.

Tunisian officials also warned that if the United States vetoed a Council resolution, Tunis might have to break diplo-

matic relations even though it needed American support against Libya.

On Wednesday, the Reagan Administration began to retreat from its unquestioning support of Israel. A White House statement said that while Israel's action was "understandable as an act of self defense," it could not be condoned.

And that night, Mr. Shultz went out of his way, in a speech in New York, to praise Mr. Bourguiba and say that the cycle of violence in the Middle East had to stop. In an interview Thursday, he said Israel could have chosen other ways to retaliate.

On Saturday, after the Security Council vote, Mr. Reagan called Mr. Bourguiba "a gifted statesman" who deserved "our support and our prayers."

The Administration decision to abstain caught the Israelis and American Jewish groups by surprise. They had earlier praised Mr. Reagan for his support of Israel. But today, several groups criticized the Administration.

Kenneth J. Blalock, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said:

"In failing to support Israel's act of self-defense against P.L.O. headquarters in Tunis, America and America's determination to resist Arab terrorism have been tested and found wanting, raising grave questions about our country's willingness to seek out and punish those who attack and murder U.S. citizens."

Arafat Accuses U.S.

ABU DHABI, Oct. 6 (Reuters) — Yasir Arafat, the Palestine Liberation Organization chairman, was quoted today by the Abu Dhabi newspaper Al Itihad as saying he had documents that prove the United States gave Israel satellite photographs of the suburb of Tunis that was hit when his headquarters was raided. Mr. Arafat, in the interview, said these helped Israel conduct the attack.

U.S. Denies Involvement

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 6 — A spokesman for the State Department today categorically denied any American involvement in the attack but declined to respond specifically to the charge that it had provided satellite photos, saying, "We never discuss matters such as intelligence gathering."